THE ROCK PAINTINGS

Adapted from a paper
by Nancy Fink

The Chumash nation was once a proud and happy tribe of about 10,000 who lived in the region of California stretching from Point Concepción in the north to Ventura in the south and from the Channel Islands in the west inland almost one hundred miles. The population of these people was swiftly decimated through exploitation, intolerance, and disease to a small band of about 300 who now own only a tiny piece of land along the Santa Ynez River. Their ancestors left extremely fascinating and intricate rock paintings, but the surviving members of the tribe do not know who painted them, why they were painted, or what they mean. Perhaps by discovering the inadequacy of the existing information on this imaginative art, students will perceive the relationship between the loss of such knowledge and the entire tragic history of the Chumash people.

The rock paintings of the Chumash are pictographs, that is, symbols and characters painted on a rock wall. The greatest number of these pictographs were painted on sandstone, but several were done on granitic rocks and basalt outcrops. The rock walls were located near a permanent water source, either a spring or a running stream, The Chumash chose sites characterized by these qualities which were either near the ocean or in mountainous country away from the villages where the great concentrations of people lived.

The paintings found near the ocean, where most of the Chumash lived, are usually crude and simple, roughly done in "linear red" style or merely chalked on the wall with a piece of hematite (a mineral occuring in a red earthy form). As the Chumash artists moved into the mountainous areas adjacent to the coastline, they successfully developed their skills and techniques, employing more imaginative abilities, The paintings in these areas are found in rather inaccessible and remote ridges and caves and represent the most spectacular concentration of abstract polychrome pictographs in North America. Basically simple designs are elaborated in extraordinary and diverse ways with bold use of vivid blacks, reds, whites, yellows and sometimes blues and greens. Campbell Grant effectively describes one of the sites in the mountain region where:

> . . . there is an immense rock about 60 feet high and formed like a horseshoe, creating a natural amphitheatre. Inside the rock are a great many fine paintings, badly vandalized. Ancient trails wind up the surface of the rock, and at the top there are more paintings, including the mysterious fishlike design. The amphitheater could easily hold hundreds of people, and it is not difficult to imagine fires burning in the center, lighting some ceremonial dance while great numbers of Indians gathered from the surrounding country to watch from the galley above. (Grant, 1965, page 90.)

The main concentrations of Chumash rock art can be separated into seven areas based on A. L. Kroeber's divisions of dialect zones as shown by the map on the following page.

The Obispeño area is generally characterized by rolling farmland and cattle range, although mountain peaks range up to 3,000 feet. Design elements from the two sites in this zone are predominantly geometric patterns,

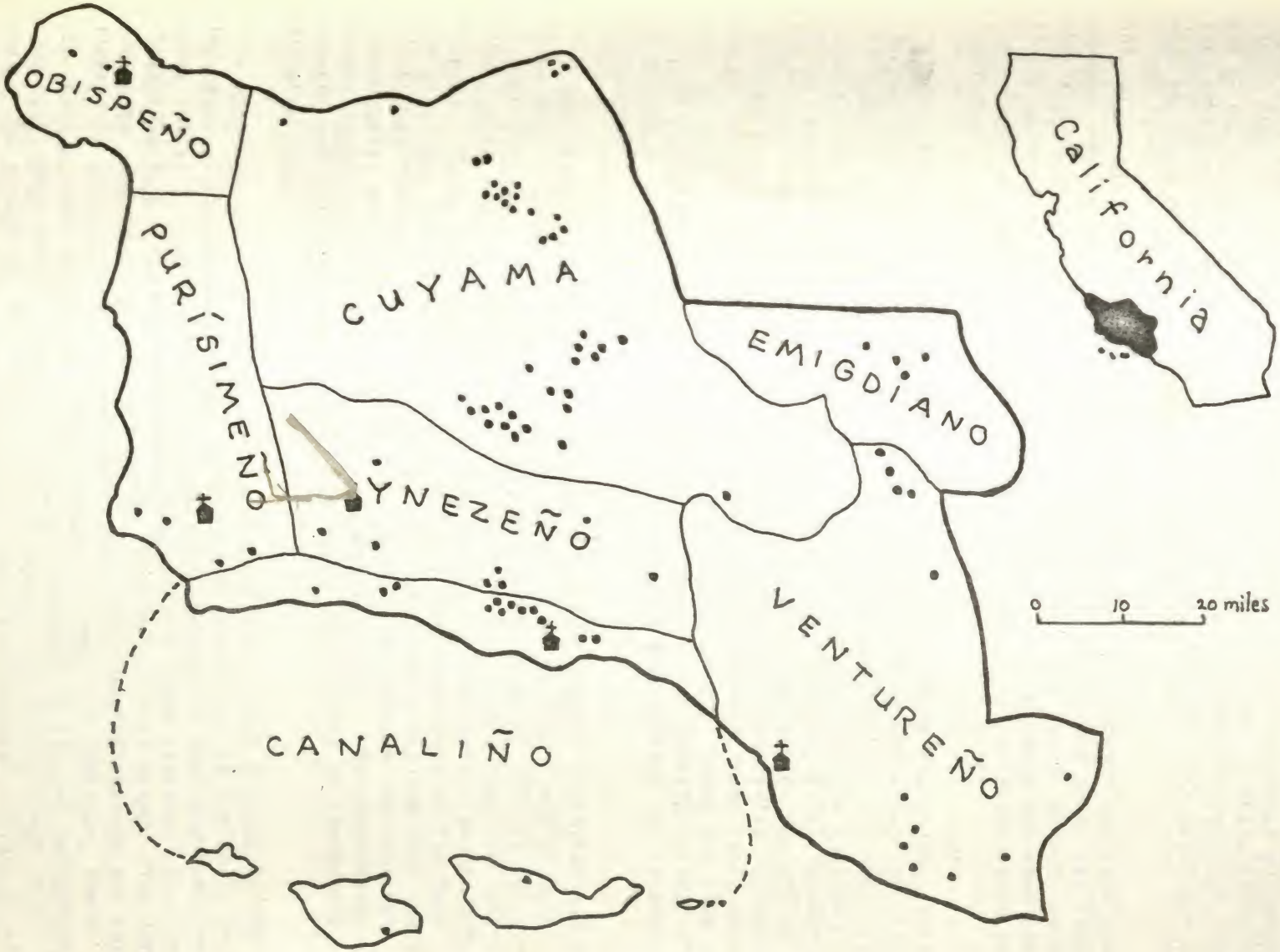

FIGURE 66. Pictograph sites in the Chumash territory. Divisions are based on Kroeber's dialect areas. His Barbareno and Island are here combined as Canalino. (Grant, 1965, page 75).

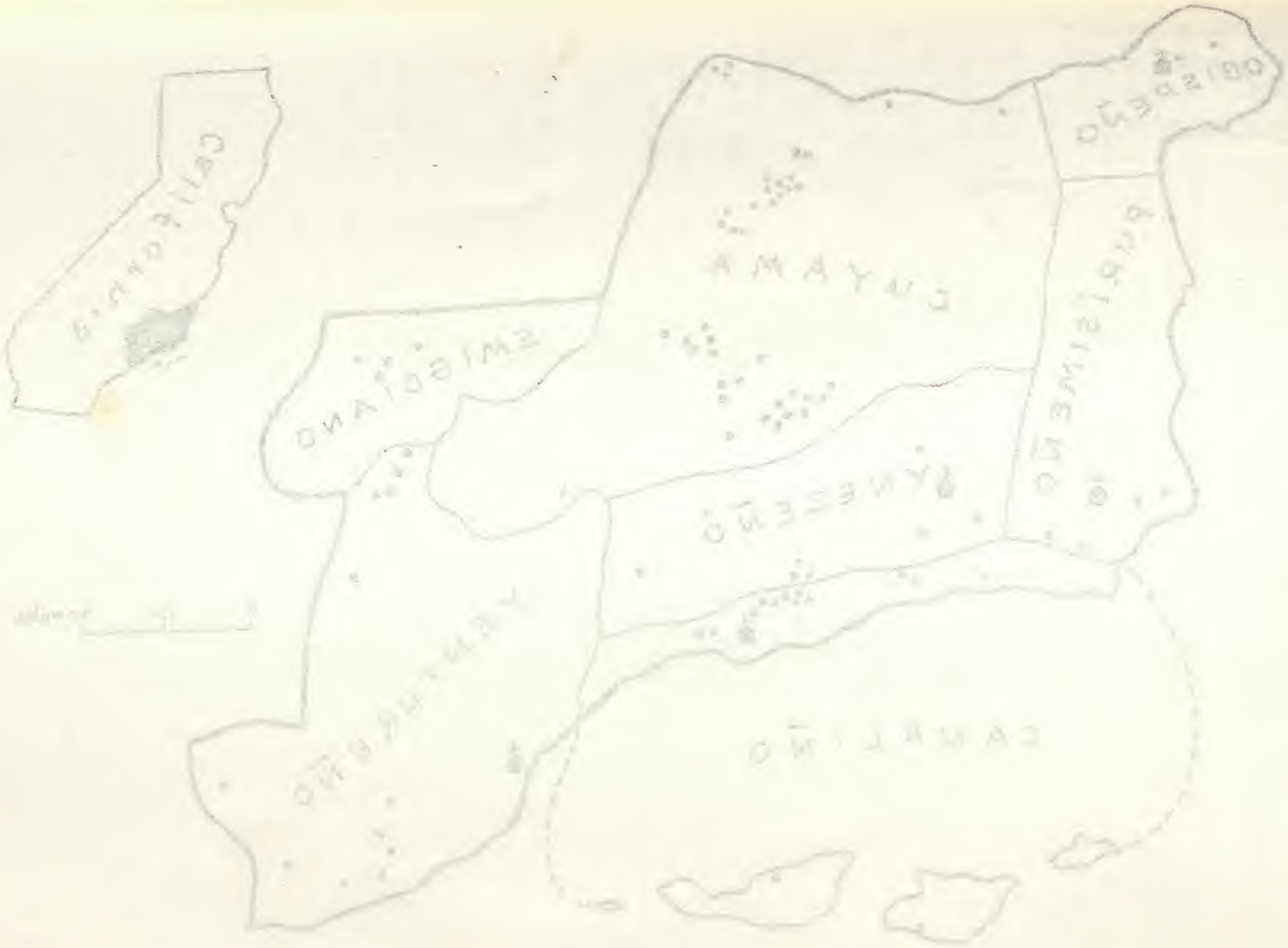

Figure 1. Placement sites in the Chihuahuan Desert. Sonoran Desert is labeled on Brewer's distinct areas. The northernmost and latest one does not indicate an association. (Grant, 1963, page 72).

especially checks and diamond shapes. Their paintings are very simplistic in comparison with other Chumash areas. There are anthropomorphs, although these lack the variety and imagination shown by the creatures in neighboring areas. The basic symbol for water (∧∧∧) also occurs in these pictographs, but it is painted in a vertical rather than a horizontal direction. The Obispeño paintings lack the vitality of other Chumash rock paintings since they are done only in the "red vertical" style.

The Purisimeño region has many small coastal streams but rock outcrops are few. The four sites of this area contain paintings which are slightly more imaginative, introducing the "target" or "sun" motif as well as several simple anthropomorphs. An exception to the still crudely executed abstract forms found in the Purisimeño region is a carefully realistic black and red drawing of a swordfish.

From Point Concepcion to Rincon Point, including the Channel Islands, is the Canaliño country. Many short streams drop from the steep mountains into the coastal plain in this area which has produced most of the ethnographic knowledge we have of the Chumash. The works created in the fourteen sites of the Canaliño region, including two from the islands, still demonstrate simple techniques with little detail. However, the inside designs on the circular forms attest to the developing skills and creativity of rock artists. Strange insect-like creatures are portrayed, some with many legs, others with striped bodies, and some even displaying wings. There are also marine designs resembling salamanders which, at one of the Canaliño sites, are intertwined in a swirling pattern that evokes the feeling of an aquatic environment.

The highest and most mountainous area the Chumash inhabited was the Ventureño, drained by the Ventura and Santa Clara Rivers and numerous short coastal streams. The art found in the twelve sites of this region abounds with fascinating bug-like creatures which have spindly legs and rake-like fingers. These creations perhaps represent various native anthropods. There are also many bird-like creatures in this last sanctuary of the huge California Condor. Other elements, such as comets, figures with feathered headdresses, and the only example of figures in profile and horsemen, add to the complexity of the art of the Ventureño area. These paintings also contain the beginnings of outlining forms with layers of contrasting colors and with dots.

North of the Santa Ynez mountains lies the valley drained by the Santa Ynez River. The Ynezeño area, hemmed in by mountains to the east, north and south, today is the home of the remaining members of the once numerous Chumash nation. The elements contained in the eight sites of this locality are unlike anything seen at the other Chumash rock art sites. The long strings of chevrons (∿∿∿) and meandering dots running through and between the strange assortments of shapes suggest a map. In addition, there is an animistic shape which appears as though mirrored by its own reflection and perhaps is a sign of a special body of water. If this strange painting did serve as a map, it was probably useful only to the other members of the artist's tribe who understood what the markings meant; it is unlikely that

it could have been a guide to a lost traveler of a differing tribe.

The northwesternmost region of the Chumash is the Cuyama, which, along with the Emigdiano, was never under direct mission control. Drained by the Sisquoc River in the south and by the Cuyama in the north, this area has the greatest number of sites: 41. The Cuyama paintings show extensive use of dots, concentric circles or targets, "pelts". and stunning contrast between blacks, reds, whites, and sometimes yellows. The Cuyama is also the region in which the "bear cave", decorated with forty-nine tracks, is located.

The Emigdiano, the seventh and most remote area, covers the southwest end of Kern county in the San Emigdio Range. This region contains probably the finest examples of abstract rock art ever found. The delicate, precise attention given to the detailed designs and the vivid geometric patterns with intricate, multi-bordered and dot-elaborated figures demonstrate a high refinement of techniques as well as keen aesthetic sensibility.

Colors

The colors the Chumash artists used in their rock paintings were those of the earth, and the favorite was red, ranging from bright vermillion to a dull rust color. This was made from hematite, an iron oxide. Black was another widely used color and this was obtained in several ways, one of which was by using hydrous oxide of manganese. A second means of obtaining the color black was by smoking the wall, which often gave a dramatic effect. The finest black was developed from graphite by the Yokuts, a tribe whose lands bordered those of the Chumash on the east. They would gather crude graphite from an area of decomposed granite and smother it in a hole filled with hot coals. When the fire had burned down, the graphite left was a fine, sooty black powder. The Chumash may eventually have developed this technique on their own. But they probably first obtained the black pigment directly from the Yokuts, as there are several accounts of trade between the two tribes.

White was often applied for contrast and for dots. This color was made from finely ground diatomaceous earth, a large deposit of which is found near Lompoc. Yellow was produced from limonite, another iron oxide, while the greens and blues found at three Chumash sites were probably derived from local deposits of the mineral serpentine or from copper ore rock.

The Chumash kept all of their pigments in round, square, and oblong cakes formed by wetting the materials after they had been ground into powders in paint mortars. Along the coast sea shells and vertebrae of large fish were used for paint cups but small depressions were picked in the rock itself in the mountain regions. To make their pigments perfect, the Yokuts made a binder of the juice of the milkweed ("Asclepias faciscularis") mixed with oil extracted from the crushed seeds of the Chilicothe ("Echinocystis macrocarpa"). Animal oil and the whites of bird's eggs were probably used at times. Although there are no records of the composition, it is reasonably certain that the binder used by the Chumash was very similar to that of the Yokuts. (Ibid., page 86).

Brushes, probably made of frayed yucca fiber or the outer husk of the soap plant, "Chlorogalum", were used to apply the paint. Other methods included using a sharpened stick for intricate work, the finger (which results in rather crude, sloppy shapes) or, the most primitive, drawing on the rock's surface with a lump of hematite. (Ibid.).

Design and Symbolism

The Chumash rock paintings contain primarily abstract designs, including geometric forms such as the square, circle, diamond and triangle. Additional basic design elements which also occur in primitive art the world over can be recognized in the Chumash works. These symbols include: (a) ϕ (b) ∧∧∧ (c) ⊓⊓⊓⊓⊓ , which represent (a) fertility, (b) water, (c) rain. In addition to these designs and those mentioned in relation to the seven general areas of the sites, the Chumash artists incorporated many other symbols into their paintings. Evidence seems to indicate that the importance of certain elements, as well as the style and degree of artistic quality, varied among the Chumash sites. In fact, only one of the design elements, a fish-like creature, seems to be found throughout the entire Chumash territory. This design occurs 42 times in 15 sites and in six of the seven pictograph areas. The creature sometimes has a fin in the middle and at one site, has a tongue emerging from one of the ends. (Ibid., page 80).

One of the most important and yet most difficult questions to answer about the Chumash rock paintings is: "What do they mean?" The artists left no records of the meaning of their drawings and the remaining members of the Chumash tribe have little or no knowledge of this aspect of their heritage. To understand the symbolism then, one must begin with the paintings themselves, and yet never know if the conclusions drawn truly express the artist's conceptions.

When viewing the abstract designs and fantastic creatures, modern observers tend to judge these forms in terms of their own experience and standards, immediately looking for symbols of natural phenomena. Circular designs are automatically the sun and figures which resemble insects or animals, such as bears, represent the real animal. It is quite possible that these symbolic explanations are correct, yet they tend to ignore the Indian's harmonious integration between himself, nature and the supernatural. The Indian lived close to the earth; he had an intimately accurate knowledge of it which developed through years of depending on the land and the sea for food, shelter, clothing and so forth. He was perfectly at home with the knowledge of scientific natural laws, yet he understood that these laws existed within the larger framework of the "unexplainable," the supernatural. As Theodora Kroeber said so beautifully in Ishi In Two Worlds (page 23):

> The California Indian was . . . an introvert, reserved, contemplative and philosophical. He lived at ease with the supernatural and the mystical, which was pervasive in all aspects of life. He felt no need to differentiate mystical truth from direct or material truth, or the supernatural from the natural; one was manifest as the other in his system of values and perceptions and beliefs.

Because they attributed intelligence and supernatural power to many living and lifeless objects, it seems quite possible that the symbols held a significance for the Indian which we can never fully grasp. Even if the creator were alive to explain his symbols, we would not understand. The Indian did not think as we do, and he did not interpret his ideas as we would. Professor Herbert Kühn, the foremost authority on the rock art of Europe thinks that the Chumash paintings

> . . . depict, not things but concepts--the concepts of good and evil that have preoccupied man since the beginning. These forces were represented differently in different places by the medicine men but were readily understandable to the people of their regions. In ceremonies involving dancing, singing, and sometimes the use of tobacco and narcotics, appeals were made to the forces of good to supply the needed things, such as health, fertility, and rain; the powers of evil, causing sickness, sterility, drought, and other undesirable things, were exorcised. (Grant, 1965, page 93).

This quote reveals another mysterious aspect of the Chumash rock art sites. It is quite evident that these sites were not merely settings for meaningless drawings. As Professor Kühn seems to believe, the rock art sites were probably important in some religious and ceremonial sense. This connection is possibly verified by the fact that a superb ceremonial dance skirt made of crow and eagle feathers was found in a cave in the Cuyama area.

The Chumash Indians' religion is perhaps the segment of their culture on which there is the least amount of information available. But one can draw general conclusions about this subject and possibly discover its relationship to the rock art sites by studying religions of other California Indians. A general description of the main concepts incorporated in these religions is found in the article, "Elements of Culture in Native California," by A. L. Kroeber. Kroeber believes that south central and south California religious cults centered around personal psychic participation, symbolism and mysticism, speculation about human life and death, and an interweaving of ritualistic expression with myth. (Kroeber, 1922, page 309.)

The most important religious figure in the California tribes was the shaman. Although the shaman's primary function was the curing of disease, Campbell Grant describes their greater significance as that of being "interpreters of nature" who "claimed the power to communicate with the unseen spirits of good and evil." (Grant, 1964, page 39). A. L. Kroeber supports this when he says that:

> The power of the Shaman being directly dependent upon his personal acquisitions of a connection with the supernatural world, an understanding of the method by which this acquisition takes place generally furnishes also a pretty accurate idea of the nature of his functions and influence. The most common way of acquiring shamanistic power in California . . . is by dreaming. A spirit,

be it that of an animal, a place, the sun or another natural object, a deceased relative, an entirely unimbodied spirit, visits the future medicine-man in his dreams and the connection thus established between them is the source and basis of the latter's power. This spirit becomes his guardian spirit or "personal." From it he receives the song or rite or knowledge of the charm and the understanding which enable him to cause or remove disease and to do and endure what other men cannot. . . . Perhaps most frequently it is merely a spirit as such, not connected with any tangible embodiment or form, either human, animate, or inanimate. (Kroeber, 1907, page 327).

Perhaps the key element to both the powers of the shamans and the purpose of the rock art sites is the Indians' fascination with their dreams, often induced by a brew made from the plant "toloache." The Indians made a vision-producing liquor by grinding the dried roots of "toloache" (also called Jimson weed) with hot water. The drinking of this narcotic by shamans and their followers developed into a cult among the neighboring bands (the Yokuto and the Gabrielino), and there is evidence that the Chumash also practiced the Jimson weed cult. In 1811, the priests of Santa Ynez claimed that their neophytes were using "toloache" with accompanying ceremonies. (Grant, 1965, page 63). From the "psychedelic" shapes and color combinations, it also seems more than likely that the shamans' creative urges were enhanced by the drug, "toloache." In his Notes, Harrington describes his informant's description of taking toloache and its supervision by a medicine man:

The medicine man first orders the head of the family and all the heads of the family's family to fast for three days. On the fourth day the medicine man finds some toloache roots and prepares them. He would tell the relatives of the man who was to drink the toloache not to allow him to sleep. The relatives would begin to come that evening each bringing some little present of food. On the dawn of the fifth day the man would drink the toloache. He would then go to sleep. They cover him to keep him warm. If he is strong of spirit he awakes at the same hour on the next day, if he is weak of spirit he sleeps for two or more days.

Since the shaman's main duties were as medicine man, the paintings may have had magical meaning in relation to different cures. A rock with a group of red centipede-like creatures was found at an inland Catalino site: Alamo Pintado. These paintings seem to portray the 'curing' duty of a shaman because the creatures (perhaps representing bad spirits) have been exorcized or 'killed' with a generous smear of asphalt. The cave with the grizzly bear tracks may also be related to a shaman's curing ability, in this instance achieved by using the power of this strong animal.

It seems very possible that the rock art sites had additional ceremonial usage. Two of the public ceremonies which were practiced by the California Indians and which may have been performed in relation to the rock paintings are mourning ceremonies and initiation rites. The mourning ceremony, a

purification ritual for the defilement which the Indians believed death brought, was the most important. The Gabrieliño, southern neighbors of the Chumash, had highly developed mourning rituals which moved Mr. Kroeber to write, ". . . the annual communal mourning ceremony, which was everywhere . . . was one of the most deeply rooted and spectacular acts of worship" (Kroeber, 1907, page 323). The painted headless figures, found especially in cave sites of the Cuyama region, may have been part of a mourning ceremony. However, even if the painted caves had some connection with various mourning and burial activities, the art work gives us no substantial clues for unraveling this relationship.

A new or novice shaman usually participated in some type of initiation ceremony where he exercised his powers for the first time with the assistance of experienced shamans. The novice might have demonstrated his skill in the use of powerful symbols by painting a pictograph as a part of this ritual. Perhaps, in addition, an older shaman made a design to help insure the initiate's success.

The puberty rite, a ceremony performed at the time a girl entered womanhood, was also very important to the Indians of California. There is ethnographic evidence in accounts about the Luiseño and Cupeño tribes who lived south of Chumash territory demonstrating the purpose of the paintings made during girl's puberty rites:

> The girls first spent three days in a pit with heated rocks. On the morning of the fourth day they were taken from the pit; their faces were painted black and remained so for a month. In the second month, vertical white lines were painted on their faces, and in the third month wavy, red, horizontal lines were added. After the ceremonies, including sand-painting, the girls raced to a certain rock where red pigment was given them by relatives and where they then painted diamond-shaped designs representing the rattleshake. Such designs are common in the region. (Grant, 1964, page 39).

It is possible that the Chumash painted caves which contain designs resembling those mentioned in the quote were used for a similar purpose.

It has also been suggested that the pictographs are primitive forms of communication, but this does not appear to be likely if one believes Robert Heizer and Martin Baumhoff's definition of communication: a system of communication must be composed of a specific group of elements with definite meanings. When an element is repeated, in order to be understood, the element must have some formal characteristics which remain invariant or sufficiently invariant that it will not be confused with the elements of similar form but distinct in meaning. (Heizer and Baumhoff, 1962, page 6). There is no such repetition in the Chumash designs and thus, the drawings were almost certainly not a system of visual communication (writing) except as an art form evoking an emotional response, or as private messages between the artist and the spirits.

Note To The Teacher

Students using this curriculum should not merely be "studying about" the rock art as a "subject" composed of a body of facts to be learned, memorized, and filed away in their brains for future "disuse." Instead, they should be building their appreciation of the Chumash art through a complete approach of sense experience combined with the facts that they are absorbing: emotion and intellect working together. Education should and can mean a process of change, not only in the amount of knowledge a student possesses, but also in his fundamental outlook on the world and his understanding of self. Such a process of change involves new content, new methods and, above all, new purpose of education in our society. The ideas just discussed can perhaps be better understood from the book, Teaching as a Subversive Activity, by Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner. For example

> The student must be central in any curriculum development. Not central to the limit that we bear him in mind as we construct out intellectual houses, but central in that our curricula begin with what he feels, cares about, fears, and yearns for (page 179).

> . . . the role an individual is assigned in an environment--what he is permitted to do--is what the individual learns. In other words, the medium itself, i.e., the environment, is the message. "Message" here means the perceptions you are allowed to build, the attitudes you are enticed to assume, the sensitivities you are encouraged to develop--almost all of the things you learn to see and feel and value. You learn them because your environment is organized in such a way that it permits or encourages or insists that you learn them.

> (Teaching should be) helping someone to know a) what he is talking about, b) what sort of information he wants, c) whether or not a question can be answered, and d) what he must do to find an answer if one can be found (page 173).

> Once you have learned how to ask questions--relevant and appropriate and substantial questions--you have learned how to learn and no one can keep you from learning whatever you want or need to know (page 23).

Location of Painted Cave

The only Chumash rock painting site effectively protected from vandalism is at Painted Cave resort on the west fork of Mario Ignacio Creek in the San Raphael Mountains of Santa Barbara County at an elevation of 2,600 ft.

Design Elements

The general design elements found on the following page can be used for illustration of the section "Design and Symbolism."

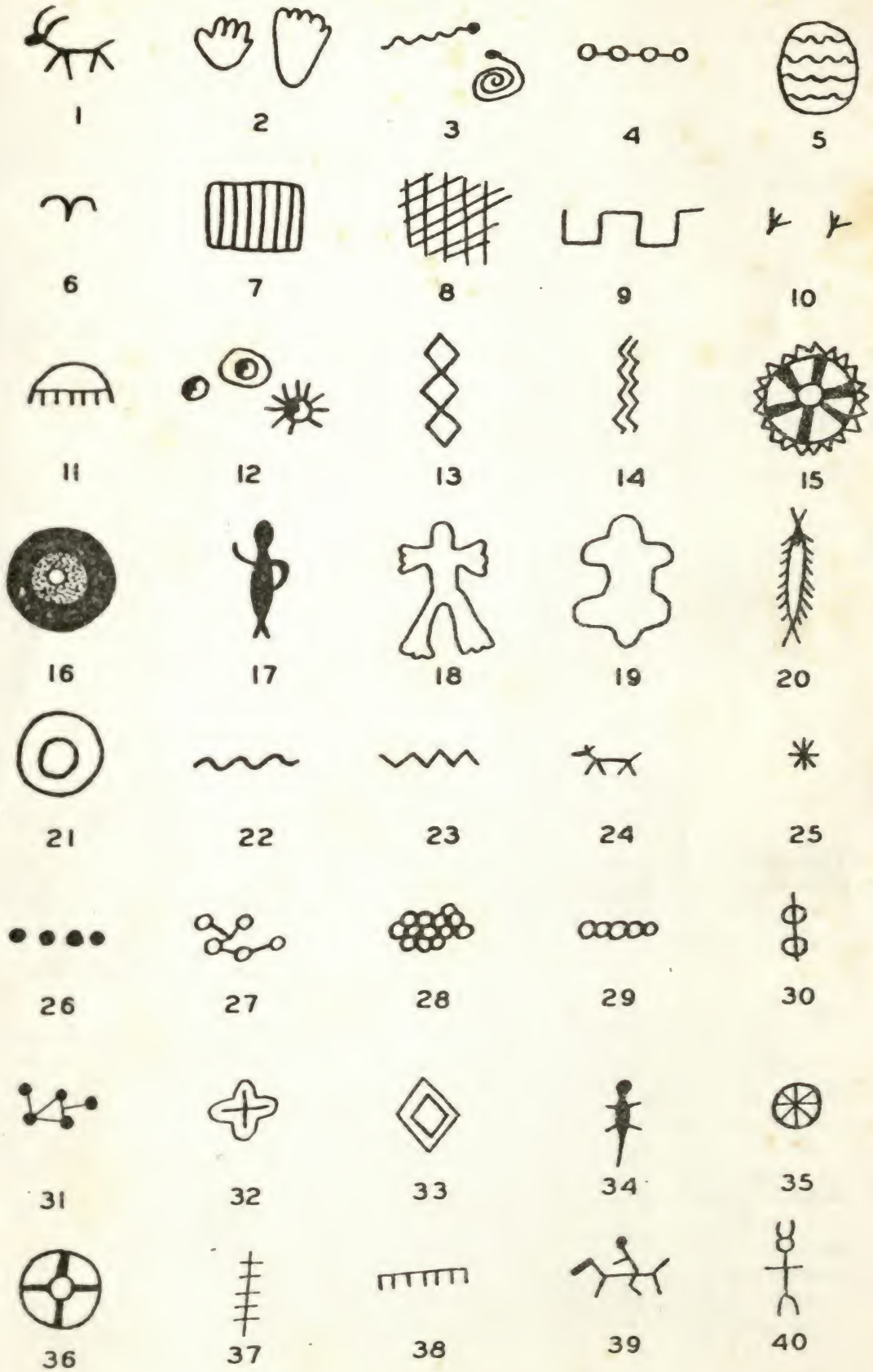

FIGURE 68. California pictograph and petroglyph design elements. (Grant, 1965, p. 78).

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